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ABSTRACT

A 13- to 15-week practical reading and writing course in English for a large 2-year, postsecondary vocational college in Tokyo, Japan was designed to train and educate the students to locate, acquire, comprehend, master and use the material employed in their chosen professions. The vocational college specializes in training translators, interpreters, and bilingual secretaries and tour guides. All students graduated from high school, but most have only a rudimentary working knowledge of English. The course is designed to allay students' misgivings about their ability to learn; devise and implement tasks to address students' low levels of language skills; impart practical skills; and establish small manageable units of 1 or 2 weeks in length. Instruction will proceed from the students' level of comprehension and deal with the information that they choose rather than from a predetermined textbook guideline. Students will be asked to delineate the communicative purposes, structure, style, content and intended audience of the texts they will collect and employ in their studies. Students will be required to assess the various grammar forms they are presented with and learn the use of these context-specific forms. The task framework provides a coherent way of addressing the various aspects of the program's emphasis and goals in definable increments that have distinct beginnings and endings. Using continuous assessment, students will be given constant feedback about their progress. Using the specific content area and the task structure enables faculty and students to define the actual skills that have been imparted. (Contains 19 references.) (RS)

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Task Based Content Area Syllabus for a Practical Reading and Writing Course at a Post-secondary Vocational School in Japan

Thomas L. Simmons

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Introduction

This is a description and justification for a course of study or syllabus for a 13 to 15 week practical reading and writing course in English for a large 2-year, post-secondary vocational college (senmon gakko) in Tokyo, Japan. The school in this description specializes in training translators, interpreters, and bi-lingual secretaries and tour guides. The school has two curriculums for two non-integrated study programmes: Japanese language, culture and business studies, and the English language studies.

This syllabus is designed to account for the hypothetical future needs of the students at this institution since there have been no needs analysis to inform the teaching faculty. The only known factors of the local context are the students' behaviour, perspective, and their general vocational goals. For these reasons the content and structure should remain focused on what is known about (a) the students' current situation and aspirations (or lack of them), (b) the economic situation as apparent from the graduating students' experiences, and (c) the specific environment of the school and the teaching faculty.

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Problems

a) All of these students have graduated from high school, but most with only a very rudimentary working knowledge of English (The results of the recent Oxford Placement Test show that of approximately 1500 new students, more than 74% scored at or below the 'pre-elementary' level and less than 7% scored at or above the lower intermediate level). In classroom surveys 60 to 65% have stated strong misgivings concerning their ability to learn to read and write English and better than 75% of those surveyed in the last three years clearly have profoundly unrealistic expectations in terms of their investment in studying time, considering one hour a week to be sufficient for study outside of class (Shiozawa and Simmons, 1994: 9).

b) The recent economic downturn has created a decrease in the number of positions available for graduates; there are now more applicants than jobs (A new phenomenon for this age group). To compound this situation, senmon gakko students are given a much lower status in hiring, so that the job market is even more depressed in comparison to students who have four-year, post-secondary degrees from daigaku (usually translated 'college' or 'university').

(c) The teaching staff is overwhelmingly composed of 'part-time' instructors (less than 10% are full-time, salaried teachers) who usually carry very large class loads that severely limit the amount of time available for preparation.

Response

The program described herein is designed forthe following:

(1) to train and educate the students in the following areas: (a) determining and locating information vital to work in their future occupations, (b) collecting the

information, (c) comprehending the information, (d) and using the information to develop their own resources that will be of practical use in their work after leaving the school;

(2) to allay the students' misgivings about their ability to learn by showing them that (a) the programme objectives are in manageable tasks at their level of comprehension, (b) the objectives have a direct correlation to the skills they will need in their chosen vocations, because the English being studied is both natural and useful;

(3) to devise and implement tasks that (a) address the students' low level of language skills, (b) encourage a high level of compliance to counteract their unrealistic study habits, (c) can be easily defined by the teachers and evaluated at frequent intervals with task completion parameters, short quizzes and questionnaires that can be prepared in class;

(4) to impart practical skills and confidence in their use of those skills in preparation for the competition they face when they seek employment.

(5) to establish a syllabus that can literally be taught without preparation if need be to accommodate substitute teachers and those with heavy schedules .

(6) to establish small manageable units of one or two weeks in length so that (a) they can be adjusted for personnel changes, (b) records can be easily compiled for future reference, (c) the students will be presented with small discrete goals to accommodate a low tolerance level of frustration.

A content area based syllabus.

The course materials should be designed to focus on the students' subjective needs (Nunan, 1988: 44). The actual texts used in the commercial, governmental and social fields of endeavour chosen by the students will be the primary resource for the students' material in this syllabus. The instruction will proceed from the students' level of comprehension and deal with the information that they choose rather than from a predetermined textbook guideline. The processes and schema appropriate for the concepts of the subject area will be modeled and demonstrated, and independent learning will be emphasised. (Manzo & Manzo, 1990: v). The ambiguity inherent in such a plan provides the teachers the opportunity to adapt to the idependent content sources and the task based approach (defined below) affords a manageable form in the expected contexts. The following subsections will delineate issues, components, and emphasis that compose the form and content of this syllabus.

A. Authenticity in content and context

(1) Delineating the issues involved

By retrieving actual material used solely for communication in the 'real' world outside the classroom, the programme can arguably begin with authentic content. But an authentic context may or may not be possible. The dilemma is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of clarification and to provide the underlying rationale for much of what is prescribed/described here, a few brief comments are in order. Experience suggests that tasks for learners should be analysed in anticipation of the skilled behaviour expected in targeted communication situations (Nunan, 1989: 38).

There is, however, a controversy over the extent to which the tasks designed for the students should mirror the actual contexts in which the learned skills will be put to use. Clark and Silberstein argue that

> Classroom activities should mirror the 'real world' ... Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message, not the medium. (1977: 51)

Widdowson appears to be presenting the other side of the issue by saying what is needed is a methodology that

> would engage the learners in problem-solving tasks as purposeful activities but without the rehearsal requirements that they should be realistic or 'authentic' as natural social behaviour. (1987: 71)

(2) Acknowledging limits to what we can anticipate

This syllabus accommodates the position that while it may not be possible to actually rehearse the 'authentic' tasks in a classroom, it may be sufficient to come as close as possible to the target skills; we can not, arguably, teach the students everything they will need to know, because of the unforseeable nature of the variety of tasks they will be expected to fulfill when they are employed after graduation.

To extend Huddleston's observations to support this view, the ability of a person to understand, use and produce a language (linguistic competence) is tacit knowledge and most of it is learned without any formal instruction. The ability to use language involves being able to understand what has not been encountered before (1976: 1). This syllabus is designed in the hope that it will give the students experience in realistic tasks so that they know how to get the job done more efficiently rather than, to put it metaphorically, beginning their careers from a cold start.

(3) Establishing relevance and defining goals

So, acknowledging the issues involved, the unavoidably hypothetical nature of the projected communication activites in the students' chosen vocations and noting the perspective that students will learn a great deal that they are not formally taught, it becomes expedient to state the pragmatic underlying rationale for attempting to 'mirror' actual communicative interaction: The students are reassured that they are dealing with the kinds of tasks they may be expected to do (e.g. use English and accepted letter formats to answer a business letter from a foreign firm) and the teachers know where to look for the material and skills the students will encounter--the goals are easier to define with the projected future context in mind.

B. The use of register and genre analysis.

Much of the actual communication in the industries related to the students' general vocational goals is available in forms that can be taught as registers which may be attributed to specific genre; letters of introduction, sales presentations, tourist brochures, airline schedules, and the like. The nature of this information is an invaluable aid in forming the basis of the instructional material and content of the methodological objectives in this course. Taking our cue from Swales' basic working definition of genre and register (1990: 40-42, 45-58), students will be asked to delineate the communicative purposes, structure, style, content and intended audience of the texts they will collect and employ in their studies. The expected form of communication relative to familiar contexts makes the texts more accessible (Swales, 1990: 87) and as such provides a definable framework to which the teachers may refer and in which the students may learn to interpret the context of the texts

they encounter (Halliday & Hasan, 1989: 40), possibly obtaining greater communicative success with the texts they produce (Couture, 1986: 87. In Swales, 1990: 41). The students' ability to recognize and reproduce specific registers will form part of the evaluation system for the course.

C. Lexical content of the programme.

The students will work to understand the material produced by a variety of sources that employ English as a first or a second language. For this reason, the lexicon will not be prescriptive, but will employ the actual vocabulary presented in the material collected; it will be wholly dependent upon natural sources. This will also afford the teacher an additional opportunity to compile a list of the vocabulary words for an evaluation.

Instructors will use the lexical component to reinforce the students' understanding of the rudimentary concepts of genre and register by pointing out the elements of cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976: 274-292) such as lexical links. In this way, the students will also begin to understand the manner in which the writers develop (or fail to develop) textual cohesion. This independent aspect of the source will give further evaluative objectives that will accommodate the students' needs.

D. Grammatical aspects of the programme.

It can be easily demonstrated that a typical advertisement, a business letter from a tourist agency or a promotion brochure from a chamber of commerce (seeking to promote local attractions) will not be written in the prose style of a work of literature. For this reason, the students will be required to assess the various grammar forms

they are presented with and learn the use of these context-specific forms rather than the rule-driven, prescriptive grammar of most ELT classrooms; the students will be exposed to the fast and loose practices of real world grammar use rather than formal academic or technical forms. In fact, the comparative styles of the typical pedagogic grammar and that of the source texts will provide the students a realistic comparison and give the teachers a chance to construct specific grammar evaluation instruments

E. The heuristic emphasis of the programme

Since the aim of the programme is to teach the students to locate, acquire, comprehend, master and use the material employed in their chosen professions, it is imperative that they be able to continue to stay abreast with the changes that take place in the various sectors of commercial English. This necessitates the heuristic approach; the students must know how to research available sources, find solutions to the problems they encounter and educate themselves in the process (Manzo & Manzo, 1990: 8-10). By emphasising reasoning-gap and opinion-gap tasks (Prahbu, 1987: 46-47) in this heuristic focus, it may be possible to avoid the sort of restricted competence that Widdowson warns against (1983: 6). Knowing whether or not this is accomplished will have to wait until student and employer surveys are (if ever) undertaken. But, as Nunan points out

> "Until such evidence is forthcoming, it is not unreasonable to allow learners to practise in class those skills which are directly relevant to the purposes for which they have come to learn English in the first place. (1988: 81)

F. Integrating Grice's maxims of conversation.

While Grice addressed his co-operative principal toward conversation (Levinson, 1983: 101; Gruber, 1993) it can be implemented in a modified form for ESL students in this programme. It has been observed by the author in past classroom assignments that students are not aware of what is appropriate both in format and content in any kind of formal correspondence.

An earlier experiment with this student population in corresponding with businesses in Britain, The United States and New Zealand produced some very inappropriate response from the students. Requests were made to tourist agencies for information to fulfill a classroom assignment and inquiries were made for non-existent travel agencies. In the first case, the students did not understand that the intended readers have better things to do than help students in Japan with their homework. In the second instance, they were unaware of the consequences of misrepresenting the facts. Additionally, a number of students wrote letters to commercial enterprises asking for information of no relevancy to the intended reader (procurers of gourmet foods were asked about studying English in Britain, chambers of commerce were informed about personal experiences in recent summer vacations, etc.). Grice's maxims can thus be utilized as a framework to establish easily definable parameters of a) quality (accuracy), b) quantity (amount), c) relevance and d) manner (precision).

G. Task based structure of the programme.

(1) Framework and definition

Utilizing the framework presented by Nunan (1989) and following Breen's definition

of tasks (1987: 23), the syllabus will address the objectives, content, and practices of the related industries by using tasks with specified procedures and desired outcomes. The successful completion of these tasks will also form a primary aspect of the students' evaluations for course work.

(2) Pedagogic versus real 'world task' rationale

Nunan illuminates the distinction between 'pedagogic' terms and 'real-world' terms by stating that

> Tasks with a pedagogic rationale ... require the learners to do things which it is extremely unlikely they would be called upon to do outside the classroom. (1989: 40)

This distinction is in opposition to the 'real world' rationale delineated by Nunan that requires the students to approximate the actual communicative interaction they will encounter outside the classroom. To reiterate the points made in the section concerning "Authenticity" (ibid), it is the pedagogic rationale which this syllabus is hopefully designed to eschew as it attempts to address the real world the students will encounter.

(3) User friendly accessibility

The task framework provides a coherent way of addressing the various aspects of the programmes' emphasis and goals in definable increments that have distinct beginnings and endings. The students will be able to address their English studies in manageable units and the teachers can confine the classroom activities to specific goals and use distinct evaluative instruments. Since there is no comprehensive teacher training in the use of any aspect of any programme at the school in this study (beyond a brief 'orientation day' at the beginning of the semester and ongoing

conversations to discuss the syllabus goals and test content), this programme is designed to be picked up at any point by any of the instructors and understood quickly with very little preparation if need be -- a distinct advantage in this senmon gakko that will imbue continuity in the classroom even when the faculty undergoes change (Shiozawa, Simmons & Noda, 1993: 174-175; Shiozawa & Simmons, 1994: 3-7)

H. Reading skills and comprehension

An exemplary text for reading instruction is "The Guided Reading Process" (Manzo & Manzo, 1975; 1990: 107, 110-11). This book demonstrates how to outline the reading material and show simplified versions of the more complex sentence structures to enable the students to work from their current understanding rather than being expected to comprehend the entire text at once. The outlines and simplified sentences can be used to focus on the registerial and cohesive factors of the texts. In this way the text can be initially modified for the students' level of comprehension until they are able to comprehend the entire text in its original form. The teachers can then prepare tests for selected texts on the basis of the outline and the textual devices that convey their register.

Evaluations

Since the students will be set tasks with specified procedures and expected outcomes, it will be possible to evaluate for each task while they are performed and when they are completed. Using continuous assessment, the students will be given constant feedback about their progress and they will have extensive data from which they can

be fairly evaluated.

(1) A working definition of continuous assessment

An adequate and simple definition of continuous assessment is the one given by Shafritz, Koeppe and Soper :

> Assessing a student's performance at ongoing, periodic levels for the purpose of monitoring the student's progress and adjusting the teaching strategies or expectations accordingly (1988: 121).

(2) Learning retention

Dempster (1992) points out that continuous assessment has been empirically shown to produce greater learning retention than traditional pretest reviews. Memory consolidation is more effective with continuous assessment than review (Nungester and Duchastel, 1982). The visible effects of studying are demonstrated to the students who are consistently held accountable for the work they invest -- or fail to invest.

(3) Improved testing reliability

Continuous assessment benefits student by giving evaluation a greater reliability. The greater number of tests (and by implication more test items) give a much better profile of their skills than do a few large tests (Hughes, 1989, ch. 5) and the students can see testing is much more fair than the use of a few tests which gives them very little room for mistakes.

(4) Testing instruments and procedures

As each task is completed, the students will actually produce something which can be evaluated according to pre-stated guidelines. Completing questionnaires, producing the accepted format of a letter with a short, clear request for information, reading an

airline schedule and answering or making inquiries about the available flights during a specific month to a particular destination, comparing the rates for transportation and lodging at various times of the year to give an estimate of the least expensive time to travel, all of these will have concise parameters of acceptability that are readily definable.

The teachers will evaluate the students on the basis of acceptable forms and the completion of the various stages of correspondence. The students will, however, need to practise writing and reading, so the faculty will write multiple choice vocabulary and grammar quizzes to accommodate the content of the material as the students encounter it and construct basic skills tests, (e.g. writing a properly formatted letter; identifying and comprehending introductions, compliments, requests, closing; correcting grammar problems as they are identified etc.) to give the students a chance to show that they have grasped the rudiments.

Conclusion

It is only realistic to assume that the combined conditions at this school are to a significant degree idiosyncratic and there is no 'template' from which to draw a general syllabus that will account for the problems involved in the classroom or with administrative policy and faculty abilities (Goldberg, 1993: 53-56). Conversely, this description can not purport to serve as anything more than an attempt to come to grips with a specific situation and a specific population.

At the end of a general English curiculum, establishing what the students have actually learned is a matter of conjecture. Using the specific content area and the task structure delineated in this syllabus, enables the faculty and the students at this

school to define the actual skills that have been imparted. However, as mentioned earlier, whether the skills learned are transferred to the real world situations the students enter must wait upon any future studies.

As noted above, the school's total curriculum is comprised of a Japanese language, culture and business studies curriculum as well as the English language studies curriculum. These two curriculum are not integrated and there is very little constructive communication between thetwo faculties. While it would be ideal to marry the interests and goals of the two programmes into an integrated curriculum with interlocking syllabi, it is unlikely to happen in the near future at this particular institution. For this reason and the aforementioned idosyncratic characteristics of the institution's environment and the limited amount of information as pointed out earlier (Goldberg, 1993: 1) any speculation about the broad context of curriculum development at this institute or any others (LSU Study Companion, page 92) would be ill informed given the stated parameters of this syllabus.

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